

The Group Behind Project 2025 Has a Plan to Crush the Pro-Palestinian Movement

Even before President Trump was re-elected, the Heritage Foundation, best known for Project 2025, set out to destroy pro-Palestinian activism in the United States.



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By Katie J.M. Baker

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In late April, the Heritage Foundation dispatched a team to Israel to meet with power players in Israeli politics, including the country's foreign and defense secretaries and the U.S. ambassador, Mike Huckabee.

The conservative Washington-based think tank is best known for spearheading Project 2025, a proposed blueprint for President Trump's second term that called for reshaping the federal government and an extreme expansion of presidential power.

Now the Heritage contingent was in Israel, in part, to discuss another contentious policy paper: Project Esther, the foundation's proposal to rapidly dismantle the pro-Palestinian movement in the United States, along with its support at schools and universities, at progressive organizations and in Congress.

Drafted in the wake of Hamas's attack on Israel in 2023 and the mounting protests against the war in Gaza, Project Esther outlined an ambitious plan to fight antisemitism by branding a broad range of critics of Israel as "effectively a

terrorist support network,” so that they could be deported, defunded, sued, fired, expelled, ostracized and otherwise excluded from what it considered “open society.”

Project Esther’s architects envisioned outcomes that at the time might have seemed far-fetched. Curriculum it believed to be sympathetic to a “ Hamas support” narrative would be taken out of schools and universities, and “supporting faculty” would be removed. Social media would be purged of content deemed to be antisemitic. Institutions would lose public funding. Foreign students who pushed for Palestinian rights would have their visas revoked, or be deported.



Victoria Coates, a former deputy national security adviser and the vice president at the Heritage Foundation who oversees Project Esther. Jared Soares for The New York Times

Once a sympathetic presidential administration was in place, the plan said, “We will organize rapidly, take immediate action to ‘stop the bleeding,’ and achieve all objectives within two years.”

Now, four months after Mr. Trump took office, Heritage Foundation leaders are taking an early victory lap.

Since the inauguration, the White House and other Republicans have called for actions that appear to mirror more than half of Project Esther’s proposals, a New York Times analysis shows, including threats to withhold billions in federal funding at universities and attempts to deport legal residents.

In interviews with The Times — the Heritage Foundation’s first public comments since Mr. Trump took office about its blueprint for shaping U.S. public opinion on Israel — Project Esther’s architects said there were clear parallels between their plan and recent actions against universities and pro-Palestinian demonstrators on both a state and a federal level.

“The phase we’re in now is starting to execute some of the lines of effort in terms of legislative, legal and financial penalties for what we consider to be material support for terrorism,” said Victoria Coates, a former deputy national security adviser to Mr. Trump and the vice president at Heritage who oversees Project Esther.

Heritage officials said they did not know whether the White House, which has its own antisemitism task force, had used Project Esther as a guide. Administration officials declined to discuss it. But Robert Greenway, a Heritage national security director who coauthored Project Esther, said it was “no coincidence that we called for a series of actions to take place privately and publicly, and they are now happening.”

Until now, key details about Project Esther, including the identities of its authors, had not been widely disclosed. The Times reviewed confidential records preceding Project Esther’s release and interviewed Heritage employees, members of the task

force that inspired the blueprint and others associated with the initiative to present a clearer understanding of Project Esther's genesis, aims and impact.



“Project Esther changed the paradigm by associating anyone who opposes Israeli policies with the ‘ Hamas Support Network,’ ” said Jonathan Jacoby, the national director of the Nexus Project. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

Republican and Democratic administrations alike have long supported and funded Israel as a crucial ally. And there have been bipartisan efforts to counter criticism of Israel by labeling a range of speech and organizing in support of Palestinian rights as support for terrorism. But Project Esther aims to go further, equating actions such as participating in pro-Palestinian campus protests with providing “material support” for terrorism, a broad legal construct that can lead to prison time, deportations, civil penalties and other serious consequences.

“Project Esther changed the paradigm by associating anyone who opposes Israeli policies with the ‘ Hamas Support Network,’ ” said Jonathan Jacoby, the national director of the Nexus Project, a watchdog group that works to combat antisemitism and protect open debate. “It’s no longer about ideology or politics; it’s about terrorism and threats to American national security.”

Heritage describes Project Esther as a “groundbreaking” national strategy to fight antisemitism that aims not to censor opinions but to hold people it deems to be supporters of Hamas, a designated terrorist group, responsible for their actions. But critics such as Mr. Jacoby say the think tank is exploiting real concerns about antisemitism to advance its broader agenda of radically reshaping higher education and crushing progressive movements more generally.

Project Esther exclusively focuses on antisemitism on the left, ignoring antisemitic harassment and violence from the right. It has drawn criticism from many Jewish organizations amid increasing calls for them to push back against the Trump administration.

“Trump is pulling straight from the authoritarian playbook, using tools of repression first against those organizing for Palestinian rights,” said Stefanie Fox, the executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace. “And in so doing, sharpening those tools for use against anyone and everyone who challenges his fascist agenda.”

Her group is one of those described by Project Esther as a “ **Hamas Support Organization,**” or an H.S.O. — a label Ms. Fox strongly rejected.

An open letter from three dozen former leaders of major Jewish establishment groups, including a former national chair of the Anti-Defamation League, recently warned that “a range of actors are using a purported concern about Jewish safety as a cudgel to weaken higher education, due process, checks and balances, freedom of speech and the press.” It called on Jewish leaders and institutions “to resist the exploitation of Jewish fears and publicly join with other organizations that are battling to preserve the guardrails of democracy.”

‘The Gloves Will Come Off Very Quickly’

The months following the Hamas attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, and the subsequent war in Gaza, saw college campuses descend into a state of chaotic division and turmoil, with endless protests and counterprotests. Pro-Palestinian advocates called for an end to the Israeli occupation and its retaliatory war campaign, while supporters of Israel defended the country’s right to self-defense and said they were harassed by their classmates and didn’t feel safe on campuses.

Soon after, four well-connected, conservative supporters of Israel met virtually to address these events.

Only one was Jewish: Ellie Cohan, Mr. Trump’s former antisemitism envoy. She said she was grateful when the three men reached out to her and affectionately called them her “Christian friends.” Two were leaders of Christian Zionist groups: Luke Moon, executive director of the Philos Project, and Mario Bramnick, the president of the Latino Coalition for Israel and an evangelical adviser to Mr. Trump. The fourth was James Carafano, senior counselor to the president at the Heritage Foundation.

Some evangelical Christians have increasingly aligned themselves with conservative political forces in Israel, supporting their claims of biblical dominion over contested Palestinian territories. Many feel a kinship with Israel because of

shared religious heritage. But some also believe that supporting Israel will hasten biblical end times, or advance Christianity's global influence.



A pro-Palestinian protest at Columbia University in November 2023. Bing Guan for The New York Times

The think tank, which has influenced Republican presidential administrations since the Reagan era, has long supported Israel.

In recent years, this support took on a new dimension, as the foundation blamed the diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives that gained prominence after George Floyd's murder in May 2020, along with other progressive movements, for rising reports of antisemitism on campuses.

The Biden administration had already released what it called the first national strategy to combat antisemitism, vowing to address the issue. (The A.D.L. counted over 9,000 antisemitic incidents across the United States in 2024, the highest

number on record since it began tracking them 46 years ago.)

But the group decided to begin their own national task force and released a statement of purpose that affirmed a definition of antisemitism that is hotly debated because it considers some broad criticisms of Israel to be antisemitic.

Statement of Purpose

Antisemitism: We recognize any attempt to delegitimize, boycott, divest, or sanction the modern [state] of Israel or bar Jews from participating in academic or communal associations must be condemned.

We recognize that anti-Zionism and antisemitism are the different manifestations of the same hatred against Jewish people.

Dozens of groups joined the task force, but an “overwhelming number” had something in common, Mr. Carafano said during a January 2024 meeting: They weren’t Jewish. A short list of initial members that Heritage posted online consisted mainly of conservative and Christian organizations.

Heritage built on the task force’s recommendations to write Project Esther, which is named in honor of the biblical queen who is celebrated for saving the Jewish people.

By summer 2024, Heritage had finalized a national strategy that aimed to convince the public to perceive the pro-Palestinian movement in the United States as part of a global “ Hamas Support Network ” that “ poses a threat not simply to American Jewry, but to America itself.”

It singled out anti-Zionist groups that had organized pro-Palestinian protests, such as Jewish Voice for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine, but the intended targets stretched much further. In pitch materials for potential donors, Heritage

presented an illustration of a pyramid topped by “progressive ‘elites’ leading the way,” which included Jewish billionaires such as the philanthropist George Soros and Governor JB Pritzker of Illinois.

It asserted that philanthropic organizations such as the Tides Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund were backing the antisemitism “ecosystem.” Later, the Heritage Foundation added the names of what it called “aligned” politicians such as Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren.

The pitch materials, which were first reported on by The Forward, included goals such as reforming academia (defunding institutions, denying certain pro-Palestinian groups access to campuses and removing faculty) and lawfare (filing civil lawsuits, identifying foreigners vulnerable to deportation). Other initiatives included plans to enlist support from state and local law enforcement and to “generate uncomfortable conditions” so that groups could not conduct protests.

Esther's Architects

Ms. Coates said that her colleagues Mr. Greenway and Daniel Flesch were the co-authors of Project Esther.

Mr. Greenway, a former senior National Security Council official, previously ran the Abraham Accords Peace Institute, a nonprofit founded by Jared Kushner that sought to normalize relations between Israel and other Middle Eastern countries.

Mr. Flesch is a policy analyst at the foundation who has written about his experience as an American Jew who served in the Israeli Defense Forces.

Project Esther also benefited from a private advisory committee that included unnamed former National Security Council members from the first Trump administration, Ms. Coates said. Their expertise “created a more compelling product” and gave the plan “a lot more grip and substance than we would have had otherwise,” she said.

Ms. Coates holds three degrees in Italian Renaissance art history, and planned on being a professional academic until she grew uncomfortable with what she has described as a “very noxious anti-Western worldview” at her alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania.



The Heritage Foundation's office in Washington, D.C. Jared Soares for The New York Times

Blogging about missile defense led to a job for former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and then roles with other Republican politicians before she joined Mr. Trump's transition team and held various national security roles in his first administration.

Two months before Oct. 7, Ms. Coates became the vice president of a division of Heritage that focuses on foreign policy and national security. But her interest in Israel, and in fighting antisemitism, long predated that role, she said. She traces it

back to her grandfather, who fought in the D-Day invasion during World War II. “I come from a line of Nazi hunters,” she said.

In her recently published book, “The Battle for the Jewish State,” Ms. Coates, who described herself as “a Christian and a religious person,” wrote that “the biblical values on which our civilization rests have always promoted an alliance between Christians and Jews.” But she said her views on Israel were based on an “America-first” approach that recognizes Israel’s role in bolstering America’s security interests in the Middle East. She has visited Israel so often that she has “no idea” how many times she’s been there, she has said. Her office features a collection of Israeli prime minister figurines.

In December, a little-known nonprofit that promotes foreign policy discourse on college campuses hosted Ms. Coates to speak about her new book. She revealed her own perspective on how the tactic of slashing federal funding to universities could be used to help bring them to heel.

“As a former academic, I can tell you the one thing they care more about than parking spaces is federal funding,” she said. “The viciousness with which the other elements of the faculty will turn on the law schools and the Middle East Studies folk,” she added. “The gloves will come off very quickly.”

The next month, Mr. Trump was inaugurated. His administration unfurled a series of directives, some of which closely resembled some of the actionable steps outlined in Project Esther.

Administration officials moved to revoke student visas and deport activists who had criticized Israel.

Necessary Conditions

HSO members in violation of student visa requirements.

They began monitoring immigrants’ and visa applicants’ social media.

Desired Effects

Social media no longer allow the spread of antisemitic content.

They sought to withhold billions of dollars in grants to some of the country's most prestigious research universities.

Necessary Conditions

HSOs not eligible for public funds.

They ordered an investigation of student protesters at Columbia University and reportedly planned to share that information with immigration agents.

Necessary Conditions

Evidence of HSOs' criminal activity gathered.

Despite acknowledging Heritage's regular meetings with the administration and members of Congress, employees at the foundation said they didn't know if White House officials had acted on their recommendations or had just come to the same conclusions about what needed to be done.

"I don't think it's a great leap to look at the changing landscape since Esther came out, and to look at the actions that Esther calls for and to look at them taking place," Mr. Greenway said. "But it's not our place, and not really our purpose, to take credit for the actions that others are taking."

In line with Project Esther's calls for state-level actions and "public-private" partnerships, a wider campaign is also underway. Heritage Action, the think tank's grass roots advocacy arm, is helping states pass legislation that penalizes those who support boycotts against Israel. It has encouraged civil litigation as law firms have filed suits accusing various people and organizations of collaborating with Hamas.

And Ms. Coates pointed to Heritage's increased presence in Israel, a country which, Ms. Coates said when she was there recently, "deserves a peace prize for what they've done over the course of the last year."

Foundation employees were in Israel primarily to discuss Heritage's new U.S.-Israel strategy, a copy of which, she said, they personally handed to Ron Dermer, Israel's minister of strategic affairs.

But they also discussed Project Esther and concern over a decline in Israel's public image among younger Americans, a trend that has accelerated since Oct. 7. It is reassuring for Israelis to hear that the largest conservative think tank in the United States is on the case, Ms. Coates said.

Leading by Example

Project Esther accuses "America's Jewish community" of "complacency." "There are multiple Jewish nonprofits that are dedicated to fighting antisemitism, and yet here we are today," said Ms. Cohan, the task force's sole Jewish co-chair.

Not everyone who Heritage hoped would join the cause felt comfortable doing so, including prominent Jewish and Christian Zionist organizations that members at the foundation assumed would be allies. Three people from such groups told The Times they did not want to associate with the plan because they found its failure to consider right-wing acts of antisemitism too partisan.



Stefanie Fox, the executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace, spoke during one of the group's member meetings in May. Jared Soares for The New York Times

Ms. Coates acknowledged that antisemitism was also a problem on the right and said that was why it was important for the Heritage Foundation to “lead by example” with Project Esther.

“Our goal is to eradicate — or not eradicate, but to confront — what we consider a very noxious bigotry,” she said.

But she and others at the Heritage Foundation also contend that the progressive groups that Project Esther charges with supporting Hamas pose a threat not just to Jewish people or Israel but, as the plan warns, to “the foundations of the United States and the fabric of our society.”

“This isn’t just a battle for the Jewish state,” Ms. Coates told her audience in December. “It is also a battle for the United States.”

Halina Bennet contributed reporting. Kitty Bennett contributed research.

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